HELPING YOURSELF

SELF-SERVICE GROCERY RETAILING AND SHOPLIFTING IN BRITAIN, *c.* 1950–75

Dawn Nell
School of Management, University of Surrey

Simon Phillips
Drugs and Offender Management Unit, West Yorkshire Police

Andrew Alexander
School of Management, University of Surrey

Gareth Shaw
The Business School, University of Exeter

ABSTRACT The period between 1950 and 1975 marked a dramatic shift in food retailing in Britain with the introduction of self-service stores and supermarkets. It also witnessed a significant rise in shoplifting, which many contemporary observers blamed on the introduction of self-service retailing. Using material from the retail trade press, newspaper reports, contemporary academic and marketing studies, and the publications of consumer associations, this article reflects on the fractured nature of the public discourse surrounding shoplifting in the early post-war period and looks at the factors that made self-service food retailing such a potentially problematic innovation. We argue that an ambivalence arose because shoplifting was regarded as a 'housewives' crime', and because of some of the specific characteristics of the self-service innovation. The introduction of self-service retailing not only fundamentally altered the relationship between consumers and retailers, and between consumers and goods, but had the effect of throwing into question existing definitions and perceptions of consumer crime. This article will show that there was considerable public debate and disagreement over who was to blame for the sudden surge in the crime, over what could be done to prevent it, and over how to treat those accused and convicted of shoplifting. Some of the ambiguities in public responses to shoplifting evident in our period were witnessed in the earlier experiences of the nineteenth-century department store. Then, as in the 1950s, public debate on the causes of shoplifting occurred within the context of broader critiques of consumerism.

Keywords: consumers, consumption, consumer crime, supermarkets, shoplifting, retailing

Addresses for correspondence: Dr Dawn Nell and Professor Andrew Alexander, School of Management, University of Surrey, Guildford, GU2 7XH, UK. E-mail: d.nell@surrey.ac.uk and a.alexander@surrey.ac.uk; Simon Phillips, Drugs and Offender Management Unit, Millgarth Police Station, Millgarth Street, Leeds, LS2 7HX, UK. E-mail: simon.phillips@westyorkshire.pnn.police.uk; Professor Gareth Shaw, Department of Management, University of Exeter, Exeter EX4 4PU, UK. Email: g.shaw@exeter.ac.uk

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One afternoon in 1962, 72-year-old Irene Morris went into a small supermarket on Kensington High Street in London. She chose a packet of biscuits, placed it in her shopping bag and walked through the supermarket looking for the other items she needed. Unable to find the pepper she was looking for, she decided to leave the shopping for another occasion and left the store to continue her journey home. However, as she left the supermarket, she was apprehended by a store detective and accused of having stolen the packet of biscuits she had put in her bag.[1] In December 1962, Irene was brought before a West London magistrate to face a charge of shoplifting. The magistrate found her not guilty and, in summing up, explained that while it was 'proved beyond peradventure that Miss Morris walked out with some biscuits for which she had not paid … it has to be proved beyond doubt that she did so fraudulently – that is to say, with criminal intentions'.[2] He noted that Irene had been carrying enough cash to have purchased the biscuits and that the store detective was incorrect in assuming that she had acted suspiciously by not using one of the store's wire baskets. The magistrate went further, criticizing supermarkets for constructing environments in which innocent people could find themselves accused of shoplifting:

> As people are invited, nay, encouraged, nay, driven to walk round and round these places and buy whatever they can be tempted to buy, it is always possible, as opposed to the assistant kind of shop, that people through the course of their progress forget things … In the old sort of shop if you helped yourself you had a huge question to answer. But so far as self-service stores are concerned it evidently is, from the point of view of the companies concerned, lucrative business for people to help themselves, from which it follows that a proportion of people will walk out from such shops without paying.

This case illustrates key characteristics of the public discussion surrounding shoplifting in Britain between the 1950s and 1970s, a crime widely believed to have reached epidemic proportions, and which many viewed as being a direct consequence of the growth of self-service retailing. But as this article will show, the public discourse surrounding shoplifting during this period was anything but clear-cut. Retailers, law enforcement authorities, magistrates, legislators and shoppers themselves struggled to make sense of the phenomenon. This was in part because, unlike most other crimes, a large proportion of those convicted of shoplifting were women, and furthermore a significant number were apparently 'respectable' housewives. There was, therefore, considerable debate on the circumstances that drove these women to steal from shops, and there was also some sympathy for the view that many apparent instances of shoplifting were in fact innocent mistakes. There was also recognition from many quarters, including some retailers themselves, that the self-service environment was encouraging shoplifting by placing consumers in direct contact with the goods in a context where desire for the merchandise was being actively cultivated through packaging, displays and advertising. For some commentators, shoplifting was reflective of a wider malaise in British society and consumer culture; the culture of consumption which emerged in 1950s Britain had, in their minds, created a situation in which people were cajoled to indulge – legally or illegally – in the excessive materialism

represented by modern retail environments. There was also considerable disagreement over who was to blame for the surge in the crime, over what should be done to prevent it, and over how to treat those accused and convicted of shoplifting. This article examines the fractured nature of the public discourse surrounding shoplifting in the early post-war period and looks at the factors that made self-service such a potentially problematic innovation.

SHOPLIFTING AND THE RISE OF SELF-SERVICE RETAILING IN BRITAIN

Contemporary observers were struck by what appeared to be a significant increase in cases of shoplifting in Britain from the 1950s onwards. *The Times* in 1963 expressed profound concern about a 40 per cent increase in shoplifting within five years.[3] As can be seen in Figure 1, Home Office statistics confirm that the number of prosecutions for thefts from shops rose markedly from 1945 to 1970.[4] In 1949 the police in England and Wales dealt with 22,054 incidents of theft from shops.[5] Following these reports, 10,948 people were charged and made to appear in court.[6] A decade later the figures had almost doubled, with the police recording 41,535 incidents of shoplifting, with 17,745 people appearing in court charged with the crime.[7] In 1968, the police dealt with 78,490 incidents of shoplifting, leading to 34,150 court appearances.[8]

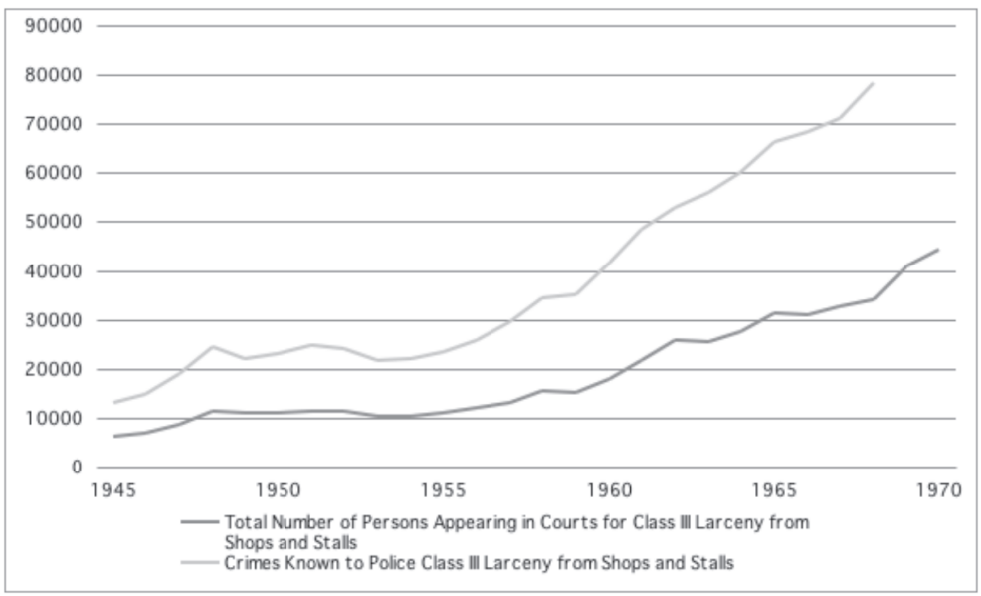

Figure 1 Shoplifting incidents dealt with by police and courts in England and Wales, 1945–1970. Home Office, *Criminal Statistics: England and Wales* (London, 1946–71).

While official statistics collected on shoplifting did not normally distinguish between self-service and counter-service stores, or between small grocery stores and supermarkets, the surge in shoplifting became linked in the minds of many commentators with the growth of self-service retailing. An authoritative study on shoplifting during this period identified a marked increase in the proportion of people arrested for food thefts – from only 1 per cent in 1949 to 20 per cent in 1959 – which the report argued was directly attributable to the rise in the number of self-service stores.[9] *The Times* similarly pointed the finger at the self-service innovation: 'it is apparently to the proliferation of self-service stores, especially in the suburbs, and to changes in the policies of stores in dealing with shoplifters, that one must look to account for the post-war increases in convictions'.[10]

For many commentators, not only was the apparent increase in shoplifting alarming, but so too was the peculiar profile of the 'average' shoplifter. In widely reported research by Professor T.C.N. Gibbens of the Institute of Psychiatry, Gibbens found that shoplifting was committed with 'unusual frequency' by women over forty, the peak ages falling between fifty-one and sixty.[11] Few of these women had previous convictions and most of them were carrying enough money when apprehended to have paid for the goods.[12] Contemporary newspaper reports on shoplifting included geographical and social descriptors that would have clearly indicated to readers the class status of the accused. Irene Morris, for example, was described as living in Palace Gate, an affluent part of London, and this, together with the detail that she was carrying enough cash to have bought the biscuits she was accused of stealing, would have suggested to readers that she was a 'respectable' woman who would not normally steal. While significant numbers of men and working-class women were also convicted of shoplifting, it was the figure of the shoplifter who was 'by social and educational background more middle class' that dominated contemporary debates on the crime.[13] Few commentators, it seems, were willing to accept the spectre of a criminally minded housewife, and commentators were, therefore, left searching for explanations. Some shoplifting was blamed on moments of mental and moral confusion brought on by the pressures that women faced in modern society. A great deal of attention was also focused on instances where innocent shoppers had been falsely accused, a situation which could arise, many felt, because of the new and confusing shopping environment created by self-service.

The rise of self-service retailing in Britain was dramatic in terms of both scale and the rapidity by which it brought about changes in the way most people did their food shopping. From just ten self-service grocery stores in 1947, the number had risen to 500 by 1950.[14] Just a decade later, there were approximately 6,350 self-service stores in Britain, of which 531 were supermarkets, and by 1970 there were 28,000 self-service stores in operation, of which 3,400 were supermarkets.[15] In terms of market share, self-service grocery stores – including supermarkets – accounted for an estimated 15 per cent of food shopping in 1959, rising to 64 per cent in 1969.[16]

When designing the internal architecture of new self-service stores, British retailers drew on the retail management doctrines espoused by American inter-war pioneers of self-service grocery retailing.[17] Most early self-service stores in Britain were, however,

smaller than their American counterparts, especially in the early period when many supermarkets were conversions of existing counter-service grocery stores. But whether small, converted self-service grocers or larger purpose-built supermarkets, the introduction of self-service retailing constituted a marked difference from the 'traditional' counter-service format that dominated grocery shopping in Britain at the end of the Second World War. In contrast to counter-service stores where relatively few items were displayed and where only shop staff handled goods, in self-service retailing shelf-space design maximized the product lines on display, and the shopper was brought into direct contact with the goods and was expected to handle, and actually carry, goods around the store before paying for them at a checkout.[18] This separation between taking goods into one's possession and paying for them created room for misunderstanding that could be exploited by the criminally minded and create uncertainty and embarrassment for the innocent.

The advent of the self-service format and the development of the supermarket are recognized as having fundamentally altered the relationship between shoppers and retailers, and shoppers and goods.[19] Rachel Bowlby and Kim Humphery in particular have documented the range of responses experienced by shoppers in the new retail spaces of the self-service store and supermarket.[20] Bowlby portrays the supermarket as 'a space of confusion or imprisonment from which you cannot escape', and Humphery describes the customer being 'encircled within the mechanics of the shop'.[21] Consumer studies research has highlighted how the changing relationships between the consumer and the retailer, and the consumer and goods, were situated in an overall morality of consumption in which consumers manifested a range of 'personhoods', characterized by dichotomies such as attraction and resistance, self-control and loss of control, necessities and luxuries, self-expression and conformity, and pleasure and anxiety.[22]

CONSUMERISM, CONSUMER CRIME AND THE CHANGING RETAIL LANDSCAPE

The early post-war period was not the first time that change in the retail landscape was linked with delinquency – crime associated with consumer culture has been documented from at least the Early Modern period in Britain.[23] One of the most significant changes to the nature of the interaction between retailers and customers, and between customers and goods, occurred with the advent of department stores in the nineteenth century. The rise of the 'irresistible cult of consumption' associated with the nineteenth-century department store and the concomitant increases in shoplifting during the period have attracted considerable scholarly attention, principally for what these developments tell us about the rise of modern consumerism and consumer cultures.[24]

Some of the ambiguities that characterized responses to shoplifting in the nineteenth century are evident in our own period. Then, as in the 1950s, public debate on the causes of shoplifting was related to broader critiques of consumerism and women's participation in consumption. Studies have shown that shoplifting in nineteenth-century department stores was also associated with middle-class women, and historians

have argued that the difficulty of explaining criminality by apparently 'respectable' middle-class women gave rise to the medicalized concept of kleptomania – an apparently medical explanation for moments of 'uncharacteristic' behaviour, which offered the prospect of alternatives to prison for the accused. The use of kleptomania as a defence was itself closely associated with a rise in the broader use of medical expertise in the courtroom.

Studies of nineteenth-century shoplifting have also documented the difficulties that shoplifting posed for retailers. Shoplifting was widely discussed in the contemporary retail trade press, with concern being centred on the problems shopkeepers faced in distinguishing between criminals and consumers, the measures they could take to prevent shoplifting, and the struggles they faced in securing convictions. Historians of the nineteenth century have also noted how retailers during this period drew criticism for 'laying traps' for unsuspecting shoppers, aggressive selling techniques, and generally 'over-stimulating' female shoppers.[25] And, long before the advent of CCTV, retailers were also criticized for subjecting innocent shoppers to increased levels of surveillance. As we shall see, elements of the public discourse surrounding shoplifting in nineteenth-century department stores were echoed in the 1950s and 1960s, as the retail landscape saw the introduction of another innovation in the form of self-service retailing.

RETAILER REACTIONS TO SHOPLIFTING

Retailers operating in the 1950s and 1960s shared many of the concerns of their nineteenth-century counterparts, but self-service retailing and the evolving public discourse on shoplifting also posed new challenges. With an ever-increasing number of shops operating on a self-service basis and larger store spaces, retailers were confronted with the paradox of creating an alluring, aesthetically pleasing self-service environment while trying to control the unwanted consumer behaviour that such an environment might stimulate.[26] Retailers pursued a range of policies and strategies in responding to projected or actual occurrences of in-store theft, ranging from the installation of mirrors and cameras, the manipulation of interior architecture, the introduction of wire shopping baskets, the employment of in-store detectives, and training programmes to teach staff how to deal with shoplifters. Retailers were, however, anxious to avoid introducing measures that would spoil the retail environment and alienate customers.

The retail trade press, such as *The Grocer*, *Self-Service Times and Modern Marketing* and *Self-Service*, played an important role in conveying information on self-service retail technologies, but these trade journals devoted far greater coverage to the commercial advantages of display and packaging techniques than the negative connotations associated with shoplifting. The retail press described self-service techniques in terms of attracting, tempting and compelling the customer. For example, Gerald Stahl of the Package Design Council suggested that the housewife needed a package to 'hypnotise' her into picking it up. A good package should, he argued, transfix a woman like 'waving a torch in front of her eyes'.[27] Of course retailers generally expected that any loss of self-control by customers would result in a greater

rate of purchases, not prosecutions, but the tight line that retailers walked in actively promoting temptation was recognized in the widely quoted phrase: 'if it is not tempting the shoplifter, it is not tempting the customer'.[28]

Shop design was regarded as an important element of self-service retailing because of the way it could facilitate the presentation of products to the customer. But it was also recognized that store design could play a role in controlling shoplifting. In *Self-Service Trading* in 1951, A.E. Hammond alluded to the merits of incorporating a corner of the store for the storage of shopping carts and lockers for customers' bags. He also suggested planning the store so that staff had a panoramic view of every aisle and gangway. The installation of mirrors around the store, he argued, had a psychological effect on potential shoplifters, increasing their sense of being under surveillance, while serving the practical function of helping staff observe the shop floor.[29] In 1952, in *Going Self-Service?*, the chairman of Premier Supermarkets explained that the products most at risk of being pilfered were those located on shelves at the rear of stores and where the ability of members of staff to monitor the movements of the customer was hindered.[30] *The Grocer* in 1956 devoted a feature article to a new branch of the Premier Supermarket chain in which the author commented enthusiastically on the stylish layout of the store, but expressed concern that the toy and confectionery section was hidden between two large gondolas, thus obscuring from sight the many children who came into the store.[31]

One of the key advantages of self-service retailing was that it allowed the customer to come into direct contact with the products without the intervention of shop staff. However, the lack of interaction between customers and shop staff was also recognized by some in the retail industry as potentially problematic. In a 1962 paper on the supermarket in *Sociological Review*, W.G. McClelland expressed concern about the lack of interaction between retailer and consumer in self-service stores, arguing that 'the cashier, even the most pleasant and best-mannered one, will rarely greet the customer as she arrives at the checkout; she is too intent on the basket and ensuring that it is properly positioned'.[32] He went on to argue that the impersonal nature of self-service retailing meant that customers and retailers harboured a mutual suspicion and 'hidden resentment'.[33] Three years after McClelland's observations, Cyril Sofer, in another sociological analysis of the supermarket involving a sample of the retail community, attributed shoplifting in part to the emergence of a 'battlefield' between customer and retailer. He noted that retailers themselves were aware of the changed dynamics, quoting one retail manager as having observed that 'instead of asking the customer "Can I help you?" you tell her, "Pick up that basket"'.[34] Retailers canvassed as part of Sofer's research admitted to feeling manipulative in exploiting the naive and impressionable housewife, for example by creating the impression that special in-store offers were reflective of reduced prices throughout the store. Some retailers, however, felt justified in exploiting 'the gullibility, stupidity, greed, dishonesty and selfishness of the customers … if the customer was easily fooled she deserved to be outwitted'.[35]

In response to concerns that the self-service retail environment might diminish the interaction between staff and customers, some retailers emphasized the need for improved staff training.[36] *Going Self-Service?* recommended that staff take care to greet

customers with lines such as 'Are you able to find all you require, madam?', or invite customers to 'Please take a basket'.[37] The cashier suspecting a theft could ask, 'Nothing more to register?'[38] T.W. Cynog-Jones, the author of a Co-operative Society investigation on self-service food retailing, recommended 'floor walking' as a means by which pilferage could be curbed.[39] The intention with these techniques was to inject a sense of personal interaction back into the potentially anonymous self-service environment, with the added benefit of increasing surveillance on the shop floor.

By the mid-1960s, store detectives were becoming a common – if generally concealed – presence in supermarkets as a growing number of British retailers began augmenting their staff with undercover detectives. In 1965, Kenneth Baker formed the first security firm in Britain devoted specifically to policing supermarkets. Baker explained how he tended to employ married women between the ages of thirty-five and forty-two years old who had two or three school-aged children. The rationale was clear: 'We take women in the older age group because they are responsible and look like ordinary housewives out shopping for the day … Many of our women are housewives themselves and realize the problems of other housewives.'[40] Despite Baker's assertion that store detectives identified with 'other housewives', they were employed to apprehend shoplifters and to act as witnesses against them in court cases. Testimony from a store detective was, for example, used in the case against Irene Morris.

While there is no evidence of store detectives bringing about an overall reduction in shoplifting, publicity surrounding their successes meant that undercover store detectives became a pervasive symbol of the surveillance of customers in the supermarket setting. The installation of in-store closed-circuit television cameras and other electronic monitoring was a further, albeit slightly later, method of deterrence through surveillance. The use of CCTV in the supermarket of the 1960s was itself part of a more widespread introduction of the technology; as Chris Williams has shown, by 1969 fourteen different police forces were using CCTV as an extension of 'the man on the beat'.[41]

Another way in which retailers attempted to bring about greater control of the retail environment was through the introduction of wire shopping baskets and trolleys. While shoppers had traditionally been expected to use their own shopping bags, retailers quickly grew concerned about the consequences of continuing this practice in a self-service environment. In 1948, *The Grocer* argued that self-service would encourage 'shoppers with large baskets and elastic consciences … to slip goods into their own bags and thus escape the attentions of the checker-out, who would be concerned only with what was in the wire basket'.[42] Retailers were initially convinced that the British shopper would resist relinquishing her 'personal equipment' of handbag and purse, and few retailers took steps to actively prevent shoppers from bringing their own bags into stores.[43] Instead, customer information programmes and store design and signage tried to encourage the use of wire baskets and trolleys and, as we saw in the case of Irene Morris at the beginning of this article, the failure to use one of the store's baskets was increasingly viewed with suspicion.

While there were a variety of deterrent measures available to retailers, they were not without their risks, and retailers fundamentally feared that the introduction of overt

anti-shoplifting measures would damage the appeal of the retail environment to the shopper. In 1956, an editorial in *The Grocer* argued that the point might be reached where honest shoppers refused to enter self-service stores for fear of being subjected to constant observation. The editorial revealed that one unnamed small self-service store had reverted to personal service not only as a result of heavy losses through shoplifting, but also because of negative reactions from customers.[44] Retailers' concerns about maintaining the quality of the retail environment meant that there was scepticism from some observers as to whether retailers were really prepared to make the necessary changes to reduce shoplifting. The authors of one important survey into shoplifting noted how goods could readily be made more secure, but that this would reduce the public's contact with the merchandise, lessening the temptation and opportunities to steal, but also the temptation to buy.[45] In 1973 a Home Office Working Group found that while retailers could identify the changes that could be made to internal store layout to reduce shoplifting, these steps were frequently not taken because of the negative impact they might have on the appearance of the store.[46]

There was considerable debate within the retail trade press on the causes of and methods of deterring shoplifting, and it is clear that retailers did not all speak with one voice. One fault line, for example, emerged between smaller self-service stores and larger supermarkets, with some owners of smaller self-service shops believing they were less susceptible to theft.[47] And the few counter-service retailers that survived into the 1970s tended to express little sympathy for the self-service shop of whatever size. In one study, counter-service retailers argued that 'they are asking for it' and 'it is waiting to be picked up'.[48] They also claimed that their more personal service gave them advantages over their self-service counterparts.

If there was variation in the methods by which self-service retailers sought to control shoplifting, disparities also existed in attitudes towards prosecuting shoplifters. Some retailers acknowledged the temptations created by the self-service environment and felt that it was, therefore, difficult to justify bringing prosecutions in some instances. In 1952, Galvani and Arnell, representing Premier Supermarkets, opined that '[w]e have not prosecuted up to now, but in the future we may. There is the view that all pilferers should be prosecuted, but it seems a shame that people should have to be prosecuted for stealing a biscuit, when it must be admitted that we are putting temptation in people's way by having self service.'[49] While it seems that attitudes towards prosecuting shoplifters may have hardened over time, the spectre of the falsely accused shopper meant that retailers had to tread carefully. Moreover the costs of bringing prosecutions meant that single offences involving small items were less likely to be pursued in the courts.

Prosecution rates for individual stores are conspicuous by their absence, not least because stores may have suppressed such information for fear of negative publicity. There is, however, some evidence in trade press and newspaper reports of supermarket chains articulating markedly different policies towards prosecuting shoplifters. Writing in 1952, the Secretary of Tesco, H.J. Hedges, explained that Tesco normally charged shoplifters apprehended in their stores, believing this to be an effective deterrent 'in view of the value of the publicity in the local press'.[50] Waitrose, by contrast, adopted a

'humanitarian' policy of not normally prosecuting children, pregnant women or the elderly.[51] And one unnamed multiple food store in London instituted a policy of merely reprimanding customers who stole goods up to the value of 7s.6d due to the administrative burden shoplifting prosecutions placed on the store manager.[52] It is also clear that retailers' policies towards shoplifting evolved over time, a fact that in itself seems to have caused confusion and resentment among shoppers. There is also some evidence to suggest that retailers who did decide to prosecute shoplifters were not always satisfied with the attitude of the courts. In 1963, following a series of cases brought by the Waitrose store in Staines against shoplifters, the managers of Waitrose complained that:

> some members of the bench had expressed strong views about the prosecutions which appeared to be antagonistic … One of the justices was concerned at the number of middle-aged ladies who were prosecuted for shoplifting and had used words which might have conveyed the impression that he had small sympathy with the applicant's conduct of business, and that his sympathy lay with the shoplifters.[53]

THE ATTITUDES OF THE POLICE AND COURTS TO SHOPLIFTING

The frustrations some retailers felt regarding police and judicial responses to shoplifting came to a head in Britain in 1963, following comments made by the Chief Constable of Southend, W.A. McConnach, which appeared to suggest that shoplifting was not an especially serious crime.[54] He had announced in February 1963 that his officers would not institute proceedings against first offenders or people who had only taken one item.[55] When the Chief Constable was asked to clarify his statement, he argued that consideration had to be given to the impact of the self-service environment on 'juveniles, unbalanced, middle-aged women, or old-age pensioners' in particular. He argued that:

> many succumb to temptation when goods are prominently displayed. It is not systemized thieving in such cases, but sudden impulse. The shoplifter often comes from a good home and the punishment of being bound over does not fit the crime. The name of the offender is published in a newspaper, and great suffering is caused to the family generally.[56]

Again we can see some ambivalence in attitudes to shoplifting caused by an unwillingness to accept that 'respectable' people might be shoplifters, together with a view that shoplifting could result from uncontrollable compulsions brought on in response to shop displays. When the Chief Constable's remarks were debated in the House of Lords, some of the country's legislators echoed his argument that the optimization of the self-service approach was to blame for shoplifting. Lady Summerskill argued:

> Should we not show more understanding with the Chief Constable, having regard to the fact that shopping has changed? Self-service stores have been established and all

> these goods are displayed in the most attractive fashion to women who are often hard up. The onus must lie on the owner of the shop to protect his goods and not to expect the courts to act as a deterrent and to be paid for by the public.[57]

Retailers were unsympathetic to the Chief Constable's comments, and industry representatives responded by rejecting the view that 'more care should be taken in the way they displayed their goods'.[58]

It was not only the police who communicated ambivalent attitudes towards bringing prosecutions against shoplifters; magistrates and judges also took varying approaches in their handling of the crime. In particular, some magistrates and judges were more willing than others to accept medical evidence of kleptomania or some form of diminished responsibility as grounds for acquittal or a lesser punishment. For example, in handing down a fine to Baroness Furnivall for shoplifting from a Knightsbridge store, the magistrate noted that two medical reports had convinced him that 'it is quite clear that you have entirely lost a grip of yourself'.[59]

Acceptance of kleptomania as an identifiable medical condition was reinforced in public discourse throughout the period and, as with nineteenth-century discussions of kleptomania, the changing role of women outside the home was identified as contributing to pressures on women which could lead to mental and moral confusion. Kleptomania was discussed in a 1970 *Home Medical Health Guide* as a medical condition brought on by menopause and the dual demands of work and home when younger women were overstressed with young children, insufficient time, and marital and financial worries.[60] A detailed study by psychiatrists into shoplifting in the 1960s had in fact found that 'truly compulsive thieves were not found' and that most women convicted of shoplifting were more likely to be 'mildly obsessional, over-conscientious and perfectionist, and were liable to phobias'.[61] There were some instances during our period of men claiming that mental strain had caused them to shoplift. For example, a trade union leader convicted of shoplifting in 1971 asked for the pressures of his role as the leader of striking workers at a Ford car plant to be taken into consideration as a mitigating factor.[62] But generally it was on women that the public discourse on shoplifting and kleptomania was most strongly focused.

As we have seen in the case of Irene Morris, some magistrates and judges felt that retailers shouldered some of the blame for shoplifting, pointing in particular to the introduction of self-service retailing. The Magistrates' Association was sufficiently concerned about developments to appoint a sub-committee to look into the matter in 1959. A member of the Council of the Magistrates' Association concluded that:

> the self-service idea had meant the bringing in of a certain number of new shoplifters and [we] had been interested in the approach of the distributors. We wanted to make sure that the people who were developing this new system were fully aware of its temptations.[63]

But retailers were understandably defensive. J.B. Turner of the Retail Distributors' Association was reported as saying that 'he did not see how there could be better control in the open counter and self-service shops without disrupting efficiency'. He

felt that 'everything was being done that could be done in this way'.[64] But even some of the specific measures introduced by retailers to deter shoplifting did not meet with approval from magistrates and judges. As we saw in the case of Irene Morris, the magistrate dismissed the store detective's evidence that Irene acted suspiciously because she did not use one of the store's wire baskets.[65]

That some magistrates took the view that retailers intentionally or inadvertently encouraged shoplifting should not, however, lead us to conclude that all magistrates were lenient towards those accused of shoplifting. Some magistrates argued that those convicted of shoplifting even small, inexpensive items should face heavy sanction. A magistrate sentencing Alice Chapman, a 58-year-old cook, to a month's imprisonment for shoplifting explained that in his view 'a small term of imprisonment for every shoplifter might in course of time not only stop shoplifting, but might make other people think it too much risk'.[66] A few years later, a magistrate sentencing Mary O'Shea, a factory hand from Willesden, to two months' imprisonment for a theft from Marks and Spencer took a similarly robust view:

> Until people recognize that prison is the punishment for stealing from shops this will go on and on and on, and all these shops all over London will be rifled week after week. Unfortunately it is a prevalent idea that, because you have not been convicted before you can safely go and steal from shops, plead Guilty … and absolutely nothing much will happen to you.[67]

Official statistics do not reveal whether working-class women such as these were more likely to be sentenced to imprisonment than middle-class women. Newspaper reports from the time certainly show that middle-class women were not immune from periods of imprisonment, even where they pleaded for clemency on the grounds of their 'good character' or because they suffered from kleptomania.[68] Evidence from newspaper reports of shoplifting convictions during this period suggests that anyone convicted of shoplifting – whatever their class background – was unlikely to face prison for a first offence, but repeat offenders were treated less generously by the courts.[69]

CONSUMER RESPONSES TO SHOPLIFTING AND SELF-SERVICE RETAILING

The public discussion on shoplifting was not left purely to retailers and the police and judiciary; consumers themselves had views on shoplifting and the measures introduced to prevent and prosecute it. One of the forums in which consumer reactions to self-service were highlighted was the National Federation of Consumer Groups (NFCG). Formed in 1963, the Federation co-ordinated the activities of more than 100 local groups of shoppers. Situated within the context of an assertive post-war form of consumer action that commenced with the establishment of the Consumers' Association, the NFCG subscribed to a more locally orientated agenda and set of activities than the Consumers' Association, focusing on the day-to-day experience of high-street shopping.[70] A strong theme which emerges in consumer discourse surrounding shoplifting is that of resentment towards retailers, not only for the

temptations that shoppers were being presented with but also because of the imposition of crime prevention measures that inconvenienced shoppers or appeared to place them under suspicion. Where they commented on instances of genuine pilfering, consumer advocates tended to blame the temptations inherent in the self-service environment, noting that children, mentally fragile women and the elderly were particularly vulnerable.

As with other commentators during this period, consumer groups found it difficult to explain how it was that so many apparently respectable people were guilty of shoplifting. In February 1965, a contributor to BBC *Woman's Hour* explained the frustrations of middle-class parents trying to understand shoplifting by their children:

> What concerns me about supermarkets is the temptation they offer to children. We have a lively, intelligent boy of eight who went into a store recently with another boy and stole some chocolate biscuits. Our home is good, his school record is excellent. Was he really a thief, or did he find the episode exciting?[71]

Like other commentators, she sought to deflect attention away from possible personal motivations for the crime and laid the blame squarely at the door of the retailer. This perspective was shared by many consumer groups. In 1963, for example, the Sutton Consumer Group carried out a survey of attitudes towards shoplifting and concluded that self-service retailing encouraged shoplifting by having altered the relationship between customers and retailers:

> Self-service stores set out to get their extra business by persuading you to impulse buy. They want you to get your hands on as many products as you can carry. They have withdrawn assistants who used to get goods for you – not just to give you better service but to bring the store quicker and bigger turnover. The self-service stores themselves, therefore, are creating the ripest situation for shoplifting there can be.[72]

Many consumer groups argued that the transition to self-service grocery retailing eroded the 'delicate established equilibrium' of the counter-service shop, transformed grocery shopping into a relationship solely between the customer and the goods, while worsening relations between retailers and customers.[73] Echoing concerns articulated by retailers themselves, the erosion of the personal attention and service of the pre-self-service era was argued to have created a situation where shop assistants and managers were oblivious to the activities of the shopper. At the first Supermarket Association Management Course in January 1963, Joan Robins, former President of the National Council of Women of Great Britain, spoke out on customer–retailer relations:

> The thing which worries me terribly in supermarkets is the absence of this man, the Manager. He never appears unless he is sent for and then he obviously doesn't wish to be known because he 'beetles' off as soon as you have had a word with him, or takes you into his back room, and as for meeting his customers this is a thing which depresses him.[74]

Many consumer groups focused their efforts on making recommendations to retailers intended to reduce both shoplifting and the number of false accusations

against shoppers. A Bristol consumer group, for example, argued in 1964 that if supermarkets employed assistants to pack customers' goods, errors would be reduced and the improved interaction between shoppers and staff would act as a defence against pilferage.[75] Some consumer publications focused on how the consumers themselves could help ensure they were not apprehended for an accidental theft. A press release, published by the Consumer Council in 1970, admitted that self-service and absent-mindedness were a 'powerful mixture'. They advised that:

> if you are going through an absent-minded phase, it might be worth making yourself check your bag when you get to the cash desk. If you have children with you, it would be a particularly good idea to do this check – there's always the chance that a four or five-year old will slip something into your shopping bag without your noticing.[76]

Consumer groups articulated fairly ambivalent responses to anti-shoplifting measures introduced by retailers. The issue of store shopping baskets was, for example, the focus of a great deal of discussion by consumer groups, with some consumers resenting the imposition of store baskets, but others seeing it as a pragmatic solution to the confusions that might result from shoppers using their own bags.[77] In July 1965, for example, the National Association of Women's Clubs at their annual conference introduced a motion calling for self-service food stores to provide facilities for shoppers to leave their shopping bags, in the hope that this would minimize false accusations of theft against shoppers.[78]

Consumers also had mixed views about the use of mirrors, CCTV and store detectives. Some consumer advocates viewed these measures suspiciously, as symptomatic of a wider intrusion into the private affairs of individuals. When, in 1968, Rosemary McRobert, a member of the Consumer Council, posed the question 'is the arrival of closed-circuit television for surveillance just one step towards "Big Brother"?', she was foreshadowing the National Secular Society's submission to the Committee on Privacy two years later.[79] The Society complained that CCTV in supermarkets was just one of 'an impressive battery of gadgetry' that intruded and spied upon public conversation and activities.[80] In 1975, a letter from a male shopper to *The Grocer* lamented the degree to which honest shoppers were in the midst of a 'Kremlinesque atmosphere' whilst shopping in the supermarket. He argued that this '1984-ish' environment was epitomized by (female) store detectives:

> In the past, if a man was being watched in a shop by a lady he could safely assume that he was being propositioned. These days the 'glad eyed' lady in the supermarket is almost certainly the store detective … I noticed that I was bumping into the same two ladies on almost every visit. At first I thought it was just coincidence. Then the penny dropped and I realized that they were, in fact, store detectives.[81]

There was also some ambivalence in the attitudes of consumer groups towards the prosecution of shoplifters. While our research suggests that retailers generally did not pursue prosecutions against people they regarded as vulnerable, consumer groups argued that retailers tended to prosecute first and ask questions later:

> if you leave a self-service store and, by accident, miss paying for just one item – no notice is taken of your protestations that it was a mistake. The Manager rarely has discretion. That means, willy-nilly, you are in court, with a chance of your name in the paper. Exceptions may be made if you are very old, very young or not responsible for your actions.[82]

One group argued that: 'It is clearly morally wrong that there should be such difficulty in finding out stores' policies and wrong that an innocent customer appears to run such a high risk of being "dragged through the courts".'[83] An equally concerned consumer advocate was Pauline Diamond, wife of Aubrey Diamond, the chairman of the Federation of Consumer Groups and a member of the Consumer Council. She used her regular column in *Self-Service Times and Modern Marketing* to urge sensitivity in dealing with shoplifting:

> When managements say such things as 'We now prosecute as a matter of course, just as a deterrent', one can, of course, see their point of view, especially considering the staggering amount of stock lost this way. At the same time I hope the enthusiasm of the chase won't cause the occasional arrest to become a standard occupational hazard even for the honest customer. After all, self-service puts us in a situation where it's awfully easy to look guilty even if you're not; so no matter how wild you are about stock losses … please be very, very sure that you're right before you clap on the handcuffs.[84]

However, not all consumers were sympathetic to the view that the self-service environment caused shoplifting. Sheila Robinson wrote to the editor of *The Times* in 1967 to remind its readers that it was 'not compulsory to shop in supermarkets. Anyone who feels unable to do so without succumbing to the temptation to put unpaid-for goods in her own basket would be well advised to shop elsewhere.'[85] Moreover, while consumer advocates evoked the spectre of an Orwellian milieu in which shoppers were under constant surveillance and suspicion, contemporary market research surveys in fact show that shoppers were relatively unconcerned about being wrongly accused of shoplifting or being under observation in supermarkets. In *Mrs Housewife and Her Grocer* (1958), anxieties about being under surveillance were mentioned by only 8 per cent of respondents discussing self-service, and in a repeat of the survey in 1961 only 3 per cent of respondents felt that the self-service environment tempted people to steal.[86] In *Shopping in Suburbia*, published in 1963, only 12 per cent of supermarket shoppers, commenting on unfavourable aspects of the experience, alluded to a fear of being watched.[87] By 1970, although the percentage of respondents who mentioned a fear of being watched had risen to 17 per cent, it was still the least frequently cited reason for disliking supermarkets and self-service stores.[88]

Running through consumer discourse on shoplifting throughout this period is the assumption that shoppers were either entirely innocent victims of a confusing retail environment or had succumbed to uncontrollable urges to steal because of their direct contact with goods that were displayed to tempt them. The introduction of self-service retailing was singled out for blame, as consumer groups argued that the self-service environment was at best potentially confusing and at worst intentionally manipulative. Consumer groups argued that the relationship of trust that had previously existed

between retailers and consumers had been irrevocably damaged, and placing customers under surveillance through CCTV and store detectives was symptomatic of the retailer's lack of regard for the customer. However, only a small minority of shoppers responding to contemporary surveys admitted to being anxious about surveillance and anti-shoplifting measures in the self-service environment. Moreover, the dramatic rise in the number of supermarkets in Britain and the growing proportion of people who shopped in supermarkets suggest that, even while some consumers harboured concerns about the self-service environment, most shoppers had pushed these aside in the quotidian pursuit of the household shopping requirements.

CONCLUSION

The period between 1950 and 1970 marked a dramatic shift in food retailing in Britain with the rapid growth in the numbers of self-service stores and supermarkets. It also witnessed a significant rise in shoplifting, which many contemporary observers linked to the introduction of self-service retailing. Using material from the retail trade press, newspaper reports, contemporary academic and marketing studies, and the publications of consumer associations, we have explored the considerable ambivalence in the public discourse surrounding shoplifting during this period. We argue that this ambiguity arose because shoplifting was unusual in being a 'housewives' crime', and because of the specific dynamics of the self-service innovation. Difficulty in accepting that so many 'respectable' people were guilty of shoplifting led commentators to search for other explanations, ranging from sudden onsets of mental and moral confusion, to kleptomania, to accusations that the retail environment itself was to blame. The characteristics of self-service retailing, with its emphasis on bringing the customer into direct contact with the goods and in tempting shoppers with attractive displays and packaging, meant that retailers, the victims of the crime of shoplifting, were characterized as having directly contributed to the growth of the crime. Retailers were guilty, it was argued, of creating retail environments that tempted otherwise respectable people to steal or in which entirely innocent shoppers could mistakenly take something. Few contemporary commentators were willing to accept the notion of a criminally minded housewife.

With an ever-increasing number of shops operating on a self-service basis and larger store spaces, retailers faced the paradox of creating an alluring, aesthetically pleasing self-service environment while trying to control the unwanted consumer behaviour that such an environment could stimulate. One of the key advantages of self-service retailing was that it allowed the customer to come into direct contact with the products on display without the intervention of shop staff. However, the lack of interaction between customers and shop staff was regarded by many in the retail industry as potentially problematic. Retailers pursued a range of policies and strategies in responding to in-store theft, ranging from the installation of mirrors and cameras, the manipulation of interior architecture, the introduction of wire shopping baskets, and the employment of in-store detectives and CCTV cameras. But while retailers had a range of deterrent measures available to them, they were concerned that the anti-shoplifting measures would damage the appeal of the retail environment to the

shopper. Concerns about negative publicity also impacted on retailers' policies towards prosecuting shoplifters, and many retailers were reluctant to press for convictions against children, pregnant women or the elderly.

The police and the judiciary also expressed varying attitudes to shoplifting. Again this was due to the belief among many that self-service retailing was in part to blame. Some magistrates and judges were also willing to accept claims that mental confusion or kleptomania had caused otherwise respectable women to shoplift, although others took the view that those convicted of shoplifting even small items should receive heavy penalties, and periods of imprisonment for shoplifting were not uncommon for repeat offenders.

Consumer discourse surrounding shoplifting during the period was characterized by significant anger towards retailers. Consumers resented the temptations that confronted shoppers and the introduction of crime prevention measures that inconvenienced shoppers or appeared to place them under suspicion, such as wire shopping baskets, mirrors, CCTV and store detectives. As in the case of other commentators during this period, consumers found it difficult to explain how it was that so many apparently respectable people were guilty of shoplifting. Implicit in consumer discourse on shoplifting throughout this period was the assumption that shoppers were either entirely innocent victims of a confusing retail environment or had succumbed to uncontrollable urges to steal because of their direct contact with goods that were displayed with the intention of tempting them. As we have seen, however, only a small minority of shoppers responding to contemporary surveys admitted to being anxious about surveillance and anti-shoplifting measures in the self-service environment, and the growing proportion of people who shopped in supermarkets and the dramatic rise in the number of supermarkets in Britain suggest that, even while some shoppers may have had concerns about the self-service environment, they were increasingly in the minority. The fractured nature of the discourse on shoplifting and self-service is indicative of the far-reaching effects of changes in the retail environment, where the introduction of self-service retailing not only fundamentally altered the relationship between consumers and retailers, and between consumers and goods, but also had the effect of throwing into question existing definitions and perceptions of consumer crime.

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